

“Inspired by Olmsted” Contest Excerpts
from *Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865*

I. “[S]cenery... cared for by government”

“The enjoyment of the choicest natural scenes in the country and the means of recreation connected with them is thus a monopoly, ... , of a very few, very rich people. The great mass of society, including those to whom it would be of the greatest benefit, is excluded from it. ... [P]rivate parks can never be used by the mass of people in any country nor by any considerable number of even the rich,

“Thus ... [unless action is] ... taken by government to withhold them from individuals, all places favorable in scenery for the recreation of the mind and body will be closed against the great body of the people. For the same reason that the water of rivers should be guarded against private appropriation and the use of it for the purpose of navigation and otherwise protected against obstructions, portions of scenery may therefore properly be guarded and cared for by government. ... It is necessary that they be laid open to the use of the body of the people.

“The establishment by government of great public grounds for the free enjoyment of the people under certain circumstances, is thus justified and enforced as a political duty.”

II. “[I]f no care were taken ...”

“It is but sixteen years since the Yosemite was first seen by a white man, several visitors have since made a journey of several thousand miles at large cost to see it, and notwithstanding the difficulties which now interpose, hundreds resort to it annually. Before many years, if proper facilities are offered, these hundreds will become thousands and in a century the whole number of visitors will be counted by millions. An injury to the scenery so slight that it may be unheeded by any visitor now, will be the one multiplied by these millions. But again, the slight harm which the few hundred visitors of this year might do, if no care were taken to prevent it, would not be slight, if it should be repeated by millions.”

III. “[T]he enjoyment of scenery ... exercises ... , tranquilizes ... and yet enlivens [the mind]”

“It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character, particularly if this contemplation occurs in connection with relief from ordinary cares, change of air and change of habits, is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect ..., that it not only gives pleasure for the time being but increases the subsequent capacity for happiness”

[Intervening paragraphs have not been included]

“But there is a special reason why the reinvigoration of those parts which are stirred into conscious activity by natural scenery is more effective upon the general development and health than that of any other, which is this: The severe and excessive exercise of the mind which leads to the greatest fatigue and is the most wearing upon the whole constitution is almost entirely caused by [focus on] ... the future, or to interests beyond those of the moment,

“In the interest which natural scenery inspires there is the strongest contrast to this. It is for itself and at the moment it is enjoyed. The attention is aroused and the mind occupied without purpose, without ... relating the present action, thought or perception to some future end. [T]he enjoyment of scenery employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it, tranquilizes it and yet enlivens it; and thus, through the influence of the mind over the body, gives the effect of refreshing rest and reinvigoration to the whole system.”

IV. “Yo Semite the greatest glory of nature”

“After midsummer a light, transparent haze generally pervades the atmosphere, giving indescribable softness and exquisite dreamy charm to the scenery, like that produced by the Indian summer of the East. Clouds gathering at this season upon the snowy peaks which rise within forty miles on each side of the chasm to a height of over twelve thousand feet, sometimes roll down over the cliffs in the afternoon, and, under the influence of the rays of the setting sun, form the most gorgeous and magnificent thunder heads. The average elevation of the ground is greater than that of the highest peak of the White Mountains, or the Alleghenies, and the air is rare and bracing; yet, its temperature is never uncomfortably cool in summer, nor severe in winter.”

[Intervening paragraphs have not been included]

“There are falls of water elsewhere finer, there are more stupendous rocks, more beetling cliffs, there are deeper and more awful chasms, there may be as beautiful streams, as lovely meadows, there are larger trees. It is in no scene or scenes the charm consists, but in the miles of scenery where cliffs of awful height and rocks of vast magnitude and of varied and exquisite coloring, are banked and fringed and draped and shadowed by the tender foliage of noble and lovely trees and bushes, reflected from the most placid pools, and associated with the most tranquil meadows, the most playful streams, and every variety of soft and peaceful pastoral beauty.

“This union of the deepest sublimity with the deepest beauty of nature, not in one feature or another, not in one part or one scene or another, not any landscape that can be framed by itself, but all around and wherever the visitor goes, constitutes the Yo Semite the greatest glory of nature.”